

Mr. Chairmen, Vice-chairs, and Committee Members:

February 25, 2013

I would like to thank you for considering my remarks this morning. I strongly support passage of HB322. This bill will provide critical resources that will help Montana ranchers and landowners avoid problems with large carnivores like grizzly bears and wolves.

I have been working with Montana ranchers and landowners for nearly 20 years on human-wildlife conflict reduction efforts as both a researcher and on-the-ground practitioner. I conducted my Master's and Ph.D. research at the University of Montana. Currently I work for the landowner driven group called the Blackfoot Challenge and I recently co-founded a small NGO, called People and Carnivores. For the past 15 years, I have focused on developing tools and techniques that reduce conflicts with grizzly bears and wolves with two key goals in mind----to protect human safety and to protect livelihoods. I have done this with a boots-on-the-ground approach and have had the great honor to work with ranchers like David Mannix, Wayne Slaght, Jay and Camille Coughlin, Jim Stone, and dozens of others. Over the past ten years in the Blackfoot Valley, we have found that it takes trust, credibility, and yes, dollars to get projects done. At the end of the day, it also means making sure that the tools really work.

For example, in the Blackfoot Valley we have:

\* Removed nearly 3,000 livestock carcasses off of ranches since 2003 during the calving seasons that would otherwise attract grizzlies and wolves onto ranches causing problems. These livestock carcasses are from natural death loss during this time of year. Since 2007 we have worked in partnership with MT Dept. of Transportation to compost livestock carcasses at their road kill deer composting facility in Clearwater Jct. We have extended this program to Granite County and have helped develop a livestock composting site in Drummond. Carcass composting is cost-effective and the byproduct can be used for roadside revegetation projects.

Carcass removal may be one of the most important tools for keeping grizzlies and wolves off of ranches-preventing conflicts from starting in the first place.. For about \$15,000 per year we cover about 1.5 million acres and help about 120 ranchers annually with this important service. Passage of HB322 could provide funds to help other communities in places like the Big Hole Valley, the Rocky Mountain Front, and Mission Valley to set up their own programs.

\* In addition to removing livestock carcasses, we have constructed nearly 65,000 linear feet of permanent electric fences around 18 calving areas in the Blackfoot that protect vulnerable newborn calves from grizzlies and wolves. The cost for this simple, yet highly effective tool is about \$4.50 / linear foot or about \$12,000 for an average sized calving area. And we have worked closely with beekeepers to build dozens of solar powered fences to keep bears from destroying apiaries.

\* Each grazing season we hire local residents to patrol the range, work with producers, and monitor livestock and wolves creating jobs and protecting livestock under our range rider program. This costs about \$35,000 per year.

\* Since we all know that bears and garbage don't mix well, we have worked hard to provide hundreds of bear resistant trash containers to residents and recently constructed a new electric fence around the Ovando transfer site this past year.

All of these projects have been voluntary and been supported by a great network of state and federal agency partners. So what does this annual investment of about \$75,000 get you at the end of the day?

From 2003 to 2012 we have observed a 96% decrease in human-grizzly bear conflicts. In the last 8 years we have had two confirmed livestock losses to grizzly bears.

Wolf numbers in the Blackfoot have grown exponentially since 2007 but the good news is that livestock losses to wolves did not. From 2008-2012, the average number of confirmed livestock lost to wolves was 3.2 / yr. across 35 ranches that comprise approx. 800,000 acres. For same period, approx. 3.6 wolves/ yr. were removed for depredations to livestock. Total suspected and unconfirmed losses to wolves or other carnivores for same period are approx. 8-12.

In closing,

HB322 is a rare opportunity for Montanans and will provide the future financial support that is necessary to grapple with the challenges of living with grizzly bears and wolves. The Montana Livestock and Loss Board has provided outstanding leadership this past year by building a broad-based coalition that has sought out critical funds to help producers and landowners. If HB322 passes, the Livestock Loss Board will be in strong position to help coordinate and provide support to those communities that need the right tools to reduce problems with grizzly bears and wolves.

I urge that HB322 be fully funded and I thank you for your time.

Seth Wilson

Blackfoot Challenge

Ovando